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ABSTRACT

The concept of social representations, which was developed by Moscovici in 1984, suggests new ways of understanding the social processes that underlie communication between individuals. A social representation is a set of concepts, statements, and explanations originating in daily life in the course of inter-individual communication. The purpose of all representations is to make something that is unfamiliar, or the unfamiliarity itself, familiar. Communication between individuals that involves the use of social representations makes those representations increasingly more similar and thus facilitates future communication. Therefore, an analysis of the communication process should reveal more similar representations among persons belonging to the same social group or class, and more differences between the representations of persons belonging to different social groups or classes. This phenomenon would explain the relative ease of communication between similar individual and social groups and the difficulty of effective communication between dissimilar individuals and social groups. Findings of a variety of studies support this hypothesis. Fifty-two references are appended. (SRT)

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Communication Relationships, Conventions of Meaning, and Social Representations

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Communication Relationships, Conventions of Meaning, and Social Representations

Abstract

Moscovici's (1961, 1981, 1984a) concept of social representations suggests a basis for drawing inferences about the social processes underlying communication phenomena from observations of individual communication behavior. A social representation is a representation (of objects, concepts, etc.) which 1) is shared with other members of a social entity, 2) originated in or was shaped by previous intra-group communication acts, and 3) provides a basis for future communication acts. Findings from research in a variety of traditions which illustrate these three characteristics are discussed, and social representations are compared to more familiar concepts, including conventions of intentionality (Worth and Gross, 1976) and co-orientation (Newcomb, 1953). Potential problems with the concept are considered, and some implications for future communication research are suggested.

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Communication Relationships, Conventions of Meaning, and Social Representations

Introduction

Arguing that society exists in the relationships among individuals, Durkheim (1898) insisted on the importance of conceptually distinguishing the characteristics of society from those of individuals. While most contemporary communication scholars would probably agree in principle, in practice there remains the problem of how to observe communication phenomena at the social level. Both the origination and the interpretation of communicative acts are cognitive, and hence can only be measured at the individual level. On the other hand, individual communication behavior is inescapably social, and can be understood only in the context of social relationships.

Moscovici's (1961, 1981, 1984a) concept of social representations suggests a basis for drawing inferences about social level phenomena, by observing the representations which individuals hold in common, the role of these representations in facilitating effective communications among members of a social group, and the changes in representations which occur over time, as a result of intra-group communication.

In brief, a social representation is a way of understanding a concept, which (1) is shared by members of a social entity (2) as a result of prior communication, and (3) provides the basis for future communication about the concept. These three

characteristics suggest several hypotheses.

In general, understanding the symbolic production of a culture would require knowing the representations of that culture. In particular, (1) it may be possible to distinguish members of a communicating group within a culture from non-members by the degree of similarity in social representations, in which case, (2) individuals with similar representations of an object should communicate more effectively with each other about that object than with individuals whose representations are less similar. (3) Representations of a concept should evolve over time, as (a) group members react to new information about the object and (b) individuals with multiple-group membership import representations from one group to another.

A sampling of research findings will be reviewed, which lend support to these hypotheses. The concept of social representations will be discussed in the light of these findings, and some potential difficulties will be considered. Finally, some implications for communication research will be discussed.

Conventions of Intentionality and Interpretation

Worth and Gross (1974) distinguished between "natural" and "symbolic" sign events, between "existential meaning situations" and "communicational meaning situations." While becoming socialized, individuals learn to classify events as either intentional and communicational, or natural and incidental, according to their society's conventions of intentionality. Those which are classified as "natural" may evoke an adaptive response and, if they enter into cognition, will be dealt with

through strategies of attribution. Those which are classified as "communicative" are subject to interpretation through cultural conventions of implication and inference.

Worth and Gross reported on a series of experiments based on a sequence of pictures of a doctor, walking past the scene of an automobile accident; none of the pictures show the doctor helping the victim. Younger children, when asked to retell the story, insisted that the doctor helped the man, because "that's what doctors do." They correctly interpreted symbolic elements, such as the physician's stethoscope, within each picture frame, but they relied on pre-conceived notions about how a physician behaves, ignoring the contradictory implications of the picture sequence. Older children, on the other hand, included the more complex sequential information in their interpretation, and inferred the meaning of the sequence according to the story-telling conventions of our society: "If they had wanted me to think he helped him they would have had a shot of him with a stethoscope or something bending over the guy in the car. They would have shown him helping somehow."

Worth and Gross concluded that "intention is verified by conventions of social accountability, conventions of legitimacy, and rules, genres, and styles of articulation and performance. These are the bases which make our assumptions of intentionality reasonable, justifiable, social, and communicational." The articulator does not necessarily mean to imply the same thing which the interpreter infers; convergence of meaning in this sense is itself inferred through social conventions.

Although it is not central to Worth and Gross' argument, it seems fairly obvious that the children in these experiments were applying, in every case, socially (communicationally) acquired conventions or representations of what signs may be taken to mean. Even the younger children recognized the stethoscope as a sign, and connected it to the socially current representation of a physician as a person who helps injured people. The older children additionally applied sophisticated conventions of sequence and representation which, we might suppose, were at least partly acquired through listening to sequential oral narrations, reading linearly-organized print materials, watching television, and attending the movies.

Neither the simpler inferences based on the stethoscope nor the more complex inferences based on the sequence of pictures is "natural" - we would not expect a child, or even an adult, in a non-westernized society necessarily to draw either inference. The conventions of inference are acquired socially. Some may be formally taught: we teach children to read maps or to appreciate the conventions of Shakespearian theater or the ballet, and most parents teach their children to associate "doctor" with helping and generally being a good person. Other conventions, such as those of sequentiality, may be learned primarily by inference.

Recognition of a sign as a communication is itself within the realm of "shared orientation." Furthermore, the degree to which a set of signs will be (a) commonly recognized as a communication and (b) interpreted in a similar way by two or more individuals, may vary according to how many orientations are already shared. This implies, third, that communication is a

reflexive process, in that today's communication acts create the basis for tomorrow's.

Some of the work of sociolinguists points in a similar direction. Goffmann (1967), for example, suggests that a primary function of communication is the maintenance of social relationships. Gumperz (1982) shows that the formal characteristics of a communication act - the language or idiom employed - may be at least as important in its interpretation as the semantic content. Furthermore, the conventions for interpreting the meaning of "code shifting" (shifting from one language or idiom to another) are acquired through informal social means, and are often understood only by certain subgroups within a linguistic community.

Generally, we might expect that persons who share similar conventions of meaning should communicate more successfully than persons whose conventions differ. Lecturers should get their point across more readily when their audience members share their orientation, persuaders should gain more agreement, and so forth.

Similar representations, more effective communication

Runkle (1956) predicted that students whose 'cognitive structure' resembled that of the teacher (students collinear with the teacher) would more successfully interpret the teacher's communication, and would hence get better grades in the course. He applied the method of triads to obtain from five introductory psychology teachers and a group of students in their classes a preference ranking of five phrases related to psychology but not covered in the course.1 Using a measure of collinearity based on Coombs' (1950) method of unfolding, Runkle then determined

whether each student-teacher dyad was collinear.2

Runkle found that collinearity predicted student's success in the course, independent of aptitude or attitude. (Aptitude was measured by scores on college entrance exams and prior GPA. Attitude was measured by which statement the subject ranked first.) A socialization effect was ruled out by the absence of collinearity among the teachers. Because collinearity predicted success independently of both aptitude and similar attitudes, Runkle concluded that the reason for the superior performance of students collinear with their teachers must be that similar cognitive structure made for more effective communication.

Wolosin (1975) determined collinearity by applying a similar measure to subjects' ranking of five statements about hostility, and found that, for men (but not women), groups of subjects with greater collinearity were able to make one another laugh more easily (by telling jokes or amusing anecdotes) than groups with lesser cognitive similarity.

Padgett and Wolosin (1980) used both Runkle's and Wolosin's measures to obtain collinearity scores for the content domains of, respectively, psychology and hostility. Same-sex pairs (males or females) were found to communicate a single word best when they were collinear in the domain from which that word was drawn; collinearity in the other domain had no effect.

Duck and Spencer (1972) used Kelly's (1955) Role Construct Repertory Grid Test to obtain personal constructs from a group of undergraduate girls who had no prior acquaintanceship, but shared both residence hall and academic major. They found a significant

relationship between similarity of personal constructs and the likelihood that a pair of girls would subsequently become friends.

More communication, more similar representations

In a study of the integration of Freudian terms and concepts into French culture, Moscovici (1961) found that Freudian terms, although they were almost universally used incorrectly (according to the technical psychoanalytic usage), had come to have a meaning which was well understood, especially by younger, more educated persons. Terms such as 'complex' and 'libido' had become part of the everyday language, with interpretations quite distinct from their usage in psychoanalytic practise. Although Freudian-based terminology retained an aura of sexuality, Moscovici's respondents were virtually unanimous in denying any explicitly sexual meaning: the disturbing core of Freud's theories had been excised, and replaced by a safer, more familiar (and somewhat more vague) concept of non-responsibility. At the same time, new terms (such as 'little brother complex'), which appear nowhere in the Freudian literature, were incorporated into the psychoanalytic argot. The result was a set of terms which can be used in everyday conversation to express a set of ideas only marginally related to the technical theories in which these terms originated. This "processing" apparently occurred through normal communication and resulted in the creation of a new language for subjective experience.

It is not surprising that most of Moscovici's respondents misunderstood the Freudian terminology; laymen often get

technical terms wrong. Misunderstandings, though, were socially consistent--the lay meaning and usage of the terms was relatively homogeneous within social groups, as well as somewhat different between social groups. This suggests a concrete interpretation for the concept of "social group membership" as an intervening variable in communication studies: common social group membership would imply a common communication history, common representations, common conventions of meaning. If two people belong to the same group over an extended time, they are more likely to interpret a message in the same way than if they belong to different groups.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that all communication is based on analogy. As disturbing new experiences occur, or previously taboo topics emerge into social acceptability, we invent new analogies, new conventions for representing these experiences, both in our private thoughts and in our communication. Such was apparently the case with emotional and mental disturbances, and subjective experience in general, during the post-war years covered by Moscovici's (1961) study.

During the subsequent two decades, sexual expressiveness and more general bodily awareness have become socially respectable. Jodelet (1984) conducted two studies, separated by fifteen years, of the way in which French men and women represent their bodies in conversation. She obtained her data through a combination of traditional methods such as questionnaires and scales, along with word-association tests and content-analysis of responses to free-response questions.

Men in Jodelet's sample tended to refer to cars to describe the workings of the body while women tended to refer to the butcher shop. Aside from revealing some rather interesting differences between the life experiences of the two sexes, this finding also suggests that terms may transfer from one representation to another. Does the commonality of representation, among men on the one hand and among women on the other, result from a commonality of life experience, or do men learn to compare the body to a machine, and women to a piece of meat, through their daily communication experiences? Jodelet's data on her subjects' inter-personal communication provide few clues, but the representation of the body in the mass media was quite salient in their minds:

> "If, to believe what subjects say, moral prohibitions on sexuality no longer carry any weight, education and social codes and rituals, by way of contrast, are considered to be an obstacle to the freedom of life and of expression of the body.... It is less the socialization of the body that is attacked so much as its transformation into a social object, its standardisation in the consumer society and its direct involvement in social relations. People, especially women, fasten with disconcerting insistence on the ill effects of advertising and of fashion..."

Jodelet also found evidence that people--particularly men--had changed their representations of the human body over the fifteen year period between studies; these changes could, for the most part, be interpreted readily in terms of the intervening social history. Awareness of the body as a locus of sickness and weakness had diminished, and awareness of the body as a locus of pleasant sensations had increased.

Apparently our representations enter, not merely into our conversation, but also into our personal and professional

actions. Chombart de Lauwe (1984) found that the way professionals, such as town-planners and playground planners, represent children in their conversation and writings was reflected in the environments they created for children. Elements of these professionals' representations such as the degree to which they had idealized or "mythicized" childhood were reflected in the amount of use playgrounds received, and in the delinquency statistics of the "new towns."

Chombart de Lauwe also found that the mediated representations of children and childhood had a strong influence on the children's self-images:

> "Boys perceive and decribe characters in a more adult universe, where they live in an autonomous manner, with their friends and enemies, who are men. Girls place their heroes in a childish and protected... universe in the company of children... One can find these differences even when boys and girls describe the same character... At the end of the enquiry children compared themselves to their heroes. This confrontation mostly led to a negative self-image."

Along similar lines, Tan (1979) found that exposure to commercials which emphasize the importance of beauty increases adolescent girls' perception of the importance and desirability of physical beauty. Pingree (1978) found that commercials portraying women in non-traditional roles can alter sex-role perceptions, although results depend on prior attitudes. Beuf (1974), Morgan (1980), Miller and Reeves (1976) and Atkin and Miller (1975) all found a relationship between the total amount of television viewed, or the frequency of viewing specific types of programming, and interpretations of sex-roles.

More generally, Gerbner and his colleagues (Gerbner, 1972; Gerbner and Gross, 1976, 1980; Gerbner et al., 1976, 1979) have

argued that heavy television use tends to cultivate the social reality which is presented on television. Heavy TV-viewers' expectations regarding the incidence of violence, the role and activities of professionals such as policemen and physicians, and power-roles within social groups closely approximate what they see on TV.

To date, the majority of media effects studies, such as those reviewed in the preceding paragraphs, have focussed on representations of society--which should be distinguished from social representations. Milgram's (1984) studies of representations of the city nicely illustrate the distinction. In separate studies, he asked residents of several quarters of Paris and of New York to sketch a map of their city. Some of the results seemed to reflect individual experiences: for example, almost every subject included far more detail for the neighborhoods where she worked and lived than for any other neighborhood. On the other hand, certain features common to maps drawn by residents from several quarters of the city pointed to social processes. Certain landmarks appeared on all or most of the maps, while others, no less conspicuous or aesthetically appealing, and often almost adjacent to a more frequently-mentioned landmark, were rarely or never mentioned.

Milgram also tested subjects on their ability to recognize photographs of landmarks in different areas of the city. Some landmarks were recognized with equal frequency by subjects without regard to either their own residence or their social class; others were more frequently mentioned by members of certain

social classes. For example, in Paris, Place Furstenberg was recognised by 59% of the professional subjects vs. 17% of the workers, UNESCO headquarters by 67% vs. 24%.

Social Representations

Moscovici (1981, 1984a, 1984b) has argued that socially created and shared representations are the communicative basis for contemporary social life:

> "The interactions that naturally occur in the course of conversations enable individuals and groups to become more familiar with incongruous objects or ideas and thus to master them. Such infra-communications and thought, based on rumour, constitute a kind of intermediate layer between private and public life and facilitate the passage from one to another. In other words, conversation is at the hub of our consensual universes because it shapes and animates social representations and thus gives them a life of their own" (1984a:53).

Objects, events, and particularly messages are interpreted according to social representations, which are held in common by members of the same group, and provide the basis for communication (as well as much of the material for cognition). A social representation is "a set of concepts, statements and explanations originating in daily life in the course of inter-individual communications... The purpose of all representations is to make something unfamiliar, or the unfamiliarity itself, familiar" (1984a: 24).

Representations are created through two mechanisms: anchoring, in which a new or disturbing phenomenon is drawn into and related to a pre-existing system of categories, and objectifying, which "saturates the idea of unfamiliarity with reality, turns it into the very essence of reality." At the base is the concept of representations: a representation may be

considered a set of cognitive linkages between an object (including abstract "objects" such as words, concepts, and feelings) and other objects, which fix it in experiential history. This concept is qualified by the stipulation that social representations must be shared by two or more individuals who are aware of the commonality.

Moscovici traces his concept of 'social representations' (representations sociales) to Durkheim's representations collectives. Harré (1984) argues that Moscovici's concept of social representations abandons Durkheim's distinction between social and individual, while maintaining virtually intact the basic individualism of American cognitive psychology:

> "Social representations are not social in the sense of belonging to the group, they are individual representations, each of which is similar to every one of the rest.... The role of 'the social' in the work of the French school seems to me to be restricted to the influence of social situations on the minds of individual human actors."

Harré contrasts this kind of representation with that of a structured social activity, such as science, or a group-defined activity such as nicknaming conventions. Moscovici (1984b) acknowledges that Durkheim intended a concept of collectively-created and held representations. However, "there seemed to be no concrete approach to the study of 'collective ideation'." By limiting the concept to a social process of constructing ideas which may be individually held, Moscovici contends, the concept is rendered susceptible to empirical research.

It is true that Moscovici's social representations are individual, in the sense that they exist in the minds of individuals. What makes the concept social is its focus on the degree of

similarity between the representations of various individuals. Social representations is a composite concept which focusses, not on the representations of an individual subject, but on the relationship of similarity between the representations of individuals. This relationship is enacted in the communication process from which the social representation emerges, and in the subsequent communication process which it renders possible.

It is not merely that social situations influence the minds of individual human actors. Social representations also serve as the basis for further social interaction; they are the traces by which the dynamic of society, the 'dialectical' process described by Berger and Luckmann (1966) can be detected and studied.

While Moscovici's composite concept suggests a basis for describing the cognitive characteristics of an individual's group membership, it incurs the risk of reification, of representing the group as an entity which is itself capable of cognition. The distinction is between a group's cognition of an object, G:x, and an individual's cognition of how "a typical group member" might be expected to interpret the object, a:(G:x). The significance of this distinction might become more apparent if we compare the concept of social representations to Newcomb's (1953) model of coorientation.

Coorientation

Newcomb (1953) originally interpreted his model as an equilibrium model, similar to Heider's (1946) balance theory, in which each member of a dyad would seek to balance his cognitions about the other person, a:b, with his cognitions about some

external object of mutual interest, a:x, and with his cognitions about the other person's cognitions about the object, a:(b:x). Although Newcomb's discussion of symmetry among the cognitive comparisons in his model tends to make the most sense in terms of cognitions that carry an affective valence (attitudes and opinions), he insisted that the basic model should apply to other kinds of cognitions as well, for example to beliefs (cognitions about "the facts of the situation") and to meanings, or cognitions about how things are to be interpreted. Chaffee and McLeod (1968) and McLeod and Chaffee (1973) also suggested that the model should apply to other sorts of cognitions in addition to attitude and opinion. However, with a few exceptions (e.g., Chaffee and McLeod, 1968; Grunig, 1972a, 1972b, 1973), coorientation research has been and continues to be dominated by affective cognitions about objects.

Several researchers have elaborated on Newcomb's basic model (cf. Carter, 1965; McLeod and Chaffee, 1973; Stamm and Pearce, 1971). McLeod and Chaffee added, to the basic model, "a's perceptions of b's cognitions about x" and "b's perception of a's cognitions about x" (figure 1). Nor need we stop here: each party's perception of how the other party perceives her cognitions, a:(b:(a:x)) and b:(a:(b:x)) is also of interest.

McLeod and Chaffee specify three basic kinds of variables: congruency, a:(b:x) ~ a:x; agreement, a:x ~ b:x; and accuracy, a:(b:x) ~ b:x. A fourth possible comparison, a:(b:x) ~ b:(a:x), is omitted from the diagram, although McLeod and Chaffee recognized its potential interest: "to the extent that such

perceptions represent a style for viewing the world, their similarity between two people might well contribute to communication effectiveness."

If the cognitive relationships of interest are attitudinal, the fourth coorientation comparison points toward an operation for the concepts of consensus and pluralistic ignorance. If a:(b:x) ~ b:(a:x), we might say that we have consensus between the two individuals. As long as we also have accuracy, i.e., a:(b:x) ~ b:x and b:(a:x) ~ a:x, the consensus measure is effectively equivalent to agreement, and adds little to our understanding of the situation. On the other hand, when a:(b:x) ≠ b:x or b:(a:x) ≠ a:x we are unable to draw any inferences about the relationship between a:x and b:x. This latter situation is a dyadic-level equivalent to the group-level concept of "pluralistic ignorance."

If the cognitive relationships of interest are interpretive, the fourth coorientation comparison is quite close to our concept of social representation. To the extent that a:(b:x) ~ b:(a:x), we would say that each person expects the other to interpret (and hence to originate) messages according to a common set of conventions. If congruency is lacking, a:(b:x) ≠ a:x, then a may need to "translate" mentally, but if a:(b:x) ~ a:x, no such translation is needed. Either way, effective communication does not require that a:x ~ b:x.

As long as the processes involved are fundamentally conversational, the dyadic coorientation model is appropriate. However, the concept of social representations also requires that we interpret the similarities between cognitions for larger

groups. As McLeod and Chaffee (1973) pointed out, extending the coorientation concept to the group presents some serious difficulties, beginning with the problem of group cognitions.

Mead's (1934) concept of the "generalized other" suggests a useful approach. Each individual, **a** and **b**, carries a model of how a "typical group-member" might interpret an object. We need not concern ourselves with the problem of measuring group cognitions, G:x, since we can generalize the dyadic level representation to the group level in terms of each individual's representation of the group cognition, a:(G:x) and b:(G:x). By comparing these individual-level representations of group cognitions, we can draw inferences about how effectively **a** and **b** will communicate. Furthermore, by comparing the representations of group cognitions for a large number of people, a_1:(G:x), a_2:(G:x), ... a_i:(G:x), we should be able to draw some conclusions about the composition of social groups within a population, and about each group's social representation of x.

Several difficulties remain. If a group consists of n persons, there are n(n-1)/2 potentially interacting dyads. In terms of the communication history of the group, it might be argued that we should include only those dyads which have actually communicated about an object x. However, in terms of the communication potential of the group, all the dyads which might communicate in the future are also important.

Even for those groups in which every member converses with every other, communication between some dyads will be much more frequent than communication between other dyads, and not all

dyadic relations will have equal weight. High-status and verbally adept individuals will affect the way other group members represent the group cognitions, G:x, much more powerfully than will low-status and reticent individuals.

The problem of differential influence on group members' perceptions of G:x may prove less troublesome at the operational level than it is at the conceptual level. If person a_1 has more influence over the social representations of other group members than a_2, then we would expect that the group average $f(a_i:(G:x))$, however it is estimated, will lie closer to a_1 than to a_2 and, for any $i \neq 2$, we might predict that $a_i:(G:x)$ would more closely approximate $a_1:(G:x)$ than $a_2:(G:x)$.

A related problem is the idea, implicit in the conceptualization of social representations as evolving through dyadic conversations, that variance should exist between the way different members of a group represent an object. I.e., the condition of similarity, $a:(G:x) \sim b:(G:x)$, is expected to be much more common than the condition of identity, $a:(G:x) = b:(G:x)$. If group members are not expected to agree precisely in the way they represent objects, then group membership must be determined by means of somewhat arbitrary degrees of similarity, and the location of group boundaries will depend on how the group's social representation is actually estimated, e.g., how much weight is given to certain high-status individuals.

The conceptual and operational problems outlined in the foregoing discussion are not unique to the concept of social representations; nor do they necessarily invalidate the concept. They do argue for a rather cautious approach to the theoretical

promise of social representations. Particular attention needs to be given to the problem of measuring social representations or, more accurately, to the problem of inferring social representations from measurements of individual-level cognitions. The relationship between the conception of social group (including structure, status relationships, and membership boundaries) and the conception of social representation in a given context also requires careful thought.

Social Representations in Communication Research

Social representations is a compound concept. The root concept, 'representation', may be defined (at the individual level) as any set of relationships which link a concept or object cognitively to other concepts or objects. Social representations may be seen as a qualified class of representations: a social representation is an individual-level cognition about how other people (e.g., members of a specified social group) will interpret an object. A social representation is stipulated as both the product of communication processes and as the basis for future communication.

These stipulations, which have the force of hypotheses, lead in turn to some rather interesting subsidiary hypotheses about the nature of communication, and about the relationship between communication and social groups.

(1) Different groups or social classes, to the extent that they share unique communication histories, will have unique social representations. In turn, this implies that (2) members of the same group will communicate more successfully with one

another than with members of different groups. If we allow that a person may belong to more than one group, then it follows that individuals may be capable of responding to a communication stimulus on the basis of any one of several social groups, or communication histories. Therefore, (3) to the extent that context or content increases the salience of any one of these groups, the individual's responses may be expected to resemble responses of other members of the salient group.

These general hypotheses suggest interesting approaches in several areas. If we define a 'public' in terms of the density of communication about a given issue, we might shift theoretical attention from the processes which lead to the development of consensus, to the processes which lead to the development of shared conventions of interpretation. Similarly, in the study of persuasion it might prove fruitful to investigate such variables as the degree to which the audience does or does not share the communicator's social representations, and the conventions applied by the audience to drawing inferences about the communicator's intentions.

Social Representations and Mass Media The cultivation theory developed by Gerbner and his colleagues (in the work previously cited) has focussed on expectations, or the cultivation of viewers' representations of social reality. Extending the idea of cultivation to social representations, or the conventions by which the mediated message (along with other, future messages) is interpreted, would seem to accord well with the basic premises of the theory.

We might expect, for example, that (1) the media will cultivate a common set of representations if members of the audience begin with reasonably similar representations. However, if members of the audience begin with different representations, then (2) the same message may mean quite different things, and hence may cause their representations to become even further disparate. For example, Cooper and Jahoda (1947), in the "Mr. Biggott" studies, found that a message which reduced the level of bigotry in a mildly bigoted subject was misinterpreted by an extremely bigoted subject as supportive of his prior view.

The effect of a medium on the interpretation of future messages may be at least as important as any overt behavioral effect. For example, Linz et al (1984) report findings which suggest that the most pronounced effect of violent movies and television shows may be found, not in the small minority of viewers who go out and imitate the violent actions, but in the majority of viewers whose representation of violence is changed (See also Goffman's, 1974, concept of 'framing').

Values Research A reinterpretation of the values research which has been conducted by Rokeach and his colleagues (Rokeach, 1969, 1973, 1979; Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984) is also suggested. Rokeach has developed a 'Value Survey', in which the value-structure of subjects is measured by their ranking of 36 value-words, divided into two separate groups (18 'terminal values' and 18 'instrumental values'). Although Rokeach (1969) has acknowledged the possibility that different subjects might interpret some or all of the words in different ways, in his more recent writing (1979) he has dismissed this concern:

> "If the values employed in the Value Survey were semantically tyrannical, meaning different things to different people, significant results of a systematic kind would not be possible... In the final analysis, it is probably scientifically more fruitful to be concerned with the question of psychological significance than with the question of the semantic meaning of values."

The foregoing discussion suggests an alternative hypothesis. If subjects differ in the semantic meaning they apply to the words in a systematic way, then systematic results would indeed be expected. That is, if members of various social groups tend to define the words in ways which are internally consistent but externally unique, then between-group results on the value survey would differ in a systematic way, independently of the actual underlying values held by group members. More important, if an individual belongs to or identifies with two or more different groups with differing interpretations, any manipulation which raised the salience of one group and lowered the salience of the other group would tend to change the individual's responses in a systematic way.

This hypothesis could be tested, by using multi-dimensional scaling (Kruskal and Wish, 1978), to examine Rokeach's data for evidence that the structure of responses predicts similar outcomes, independent of absolute rank ordering. It could also be tested by looking for evidence that members of any given social group or class represent value terms such as "freedom" or "equality" in a way which is similar to other members of their group, but different from non-members.

Methods

In order to use the concept of social representations with minimum risk of reification, two principles must be observed. First, the properties of individuals must be distinguished from properties of groups. Second, the time sequence of relationships among the various elements of the concept must be maintained.

Representations as such are cognitive, and hence are the property of individuals, not of the group. At the individual level, a representation may be conceived as a set of relationships linking one cognitive object (concept, action, etc.) to others. Representations may include, for example, ideas of causality, classifications, scripts, algorithms for recognizing and interpreting communication events.

Communication patterns are social, and hence are properties of the group. These include connections (who talks to whom), frequency, content, etc. Inter-individual (intra-group) similarities in representations, and in particular the conventions by which group members recognize and interpret communication acts, are also properties of the group.

Representations can not be observed; they can only be inferred from behaviors of individuals. The most obvious of these behaviors is communication behavior. Data can be gathered from individuals directly, i.e., by asking them what a thing or concept means to them; data can also be gathered indirectly, in a number of ways. First, the naturally occurring communication acts of individuals can be analyzed for either implicit or explicit connections. Just as we analyze theorists' scientific conceptual definitions, we can analyze research subjects'

everyday conceptual representations. Second, we can create artificially structured communication acts (such as the structured hierarchies of phrases used by Runkle, the word-association tasks used by Jodelet, or Osgood et al.'s (1957) semantic differentials. Third, we can collect classification data (Rosch, 1977) or similarity (difference) data (Shepard, 1980). Fourth, we can use stimuli such as Worth and Gross' (1976) or Bransford and McCarrell's (1977) pictures and sketches, and analyze the explanations or stories provided by subjects.

However we gather data about individual representations, social representations can be inferred by comparing the data from various individuals. Since a social representation is defined as a representation which is shared as a result of prior communication, we should ideally compare responses from two or more persons from each of two or more reasonably diverse groups: in order to be sure that we have a social representation, we need to know that members of a communicating group are more similar to one another than to non-members. Alternatively, ease of communicating, which has been a dependent variable in most of the studies to date, could be employed as an independent variable, under the assumption that persons who communicate rapidly and efficiently about a topic must share similar representations of the topic.

Concluding Remarks

Moscovici's concept of social representations, which assumes that communication acts are reflexive, suggests a method for observing the workings of communication processes. If communica-

tion acts bring the representations of the communicants closer in similarity, then the process should leave traces in the form of similarities among the representations of persons who belong to the same social group or class, and differences between the representations of persons who do not belong to the same social group or class. Research findings from both the United States and Europe provide evidence of just the kind of relationships which would be expected.

Moscovici's concept has much in common with theories of society and communication going back to Cooley and Mead. It combines some familiar concepts in a new way, and shifts the focus from individual-level characteristics and acts to social level similarities and relationships. Approached incautiously, it could lead to reification of social relationships, or to confounding social with individual levels of analysis. However, it has stimulated a large and interesting body of research (see the volume edited by Farr and Moscovici, 1984) and may suggest new approaches to some old communication questions.

Notes

1. In the method of triads, each possible combination of three statements is presented and the subject asked to choose the statements, from among the three, with which he most and least agrees.

2. In Coombs' method of unfolding, subjects are judged to be collinear if they give rank orderings which can be construed as representing the same underlying scale.

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Figure 1
Coorientation--the Basic Model
(Adapted from McLeod and Chaffee, 1973)